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ABSTRACT

By limiting sentence combining to the arena of syntax and skills, an individual's own thinking is seriously constricted. Any linguistic act is simultaneously two games at once--an "inner game" of intention and strategy, and an "outer game" of actual performance. According to this formulation, all language events are intentional, purposeful, and social--a way of personally constructing the world and communicating it (to others). Much of the writing process movement has shown how increased attention to the inner game can result in better outer game performance. Since writing is thinking, more planning should lead to better writing. To date, most sentence combining activities have focused on outer game performance, not on the interplay of intentions and strategy with sentence-level decisions. Frank Smith says that much language learning is vicarious--that to the extent that people are engaged as members of the Literacy Club they are internalizing an enormous array of lessons, without conscious effort or awareness. Certain types of given-language activities--assuming that they stimulate inner game/outer game learning--provide an alternate way to help certain students regain sensitivity to literacy lessons. They support such learning because they engage students collaboratively. (One format for a persuasive writing lesson is included and 12 references are attached.) (MG)

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PREMISES, PREMISES: NEW WAYS TO THINK ABOUT SENTENCE COMBINING

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The early sentence-combining (SC) research of Kellogg Hunt, John Mellon and Frank O'Hare developed from the premise--and implied promise--that increased competence at the syntactic level would result in "better writing." Whether that promise has been fulfilled is debatable, of course, but it seems safe to assert that SC has become a mainstream pedagogy, at least in the arena of skills instruction and developmental writing.

This owes partly to the fact that George Hillocks' Research on Written Composition (1986) identified SC as a potentially useful strategy and partly to the experience of many of us--that SC provides a practical way for students to work with syntactic options, thereby increasing their sentence fluency and awareness of style. Not to be overlooked, of course, is that SC offers more traditionally oriented instructors a relatively painless, even fashionable, way to teach grammar and mechanics.

As I hope to point out here, however, the SC approach remains strangely tethered to its original assumptions. Stated in syllogistic form, the premises of the "Syntactic Fluency Hypothesis" go something like this:

1. Skilled writers produce quality writing.
2. One evidence of writing skill is syntactic fluency.
3. Therefore, gains in syntactic fluency lead to quality writing.

(Strong 1986, 11)

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While not often articulated, these premises build upon the notion of "automaticity"--the idea that as certain behaviors (such as linguistic transformations) become habituated or automatic, one frees up cognitive space to attend to discourse-level functions.

According to this notion, whole sequences of complex skills can become routine--as, for example, when we use a morning's drive to school to plan details of our first class. In writing, so the argument goes, when one doesn't have to worry about how to manipulate syntax, there's a fair chance that "mature" (or "literary") structures will show up in real text. However, SC critics have been quick to point out the flaw in such reasoning--namely, that syntactic fluency is only one discourse skill among many. "What about the other skills of writing?" they ask.

In "How Sentence Combining Works" (1985) and Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining (1986), I tried to show that the SC approach has been defined mainly in syntactic skill-building terms, not as a way of developing students' awareness of rhetorical principles and options. Here I argue that while a grammar-based rationale for SC seems reasonable in retrospect, it severely limits our thinking. I then explore what I regard as a new premise for SC--a premise that perhaps holds promise for professional dialogue. My point is that by conceptualizing SC more broadly--as an interactive and collaborative learning activity--we may see possibilities beyond the level of syntactic skill-building.

After developing a new rationale for SC and commenting briefly on the unrealized potential of SC in computer-assisted instruction, I share an easy-to-use, contextually-based classroom activity, one that helps

students to consider rhetorical issues such as audience and tone as they reorganize, elaborate, or edit text. The format of this lesson, inviting collaboration and problem-solving as well as syntactic play, may prove useful to teachers who want to rework existing SC exercises.

Syntax and Sentence Combining Revisited

To begin, let me assert that SC has long been linked to grammar for at least two reasons. First, modern SC is the no-account offspring of transformational-generative theory. Specifically, the notion that big sentences are built from little ones made sense to many of us and became part of the standard SC rationale from the late 60s forward. Ironically, as the analytic tools of generative theory fell by the intellectual wayside, the metaphors of "kernel sentence" and "transformations" continued to illumine our conceptions of language. Most of us read Noam Chomsky's lips, I suspect, rather than his text.

But if transformational theory was the parent of SC, then empirical research was its midwife. For example, when Kellogg Hunt focused on language development, using SC rewriting tasks as a research tool, he showed how the features of increased clause length, depth of modification, and nominalization characterized developing maturity in written syntax. When John Mellon investigated SC as a teaching approach, he was mainly interested in its potential for enhancing "syntactic fluency," not for improving writing quality. When Frank O'Hare used Mellon's curriculum, albeit without grammatical cues, he was still attempting to induce certain transformations. From the very beginning,

then, a grammar-based rationale for SC--when coupled with a research paradigm emphasizing syntax--predisposed us to think about SC in fairly narrow ways.

Now, let me hasten to add here that I certainly have nothing against humane and practical alternatives to grammar instruction, one of which is SC. Like most writing instructors, I contend that any activity that engages students in putting-together processes and builds their confidence for writing tasks has to be preferred over the pedagogically bankrupt approach of naming sentence parts and filling in blanks. In fact, if one contrasts putting-together versus taking-apart approaches--and trusts research and/or classroom experience--there's hardly a contest. Teaching that works is certainly better than teaching that doesn't. And there is satisfaction in seeing students acquire the know-how and confidence to write with style--reducing clauses to phrases, perhaps, or revising loosely linked coordinate clauses into tightly reasoned subordinate ones.

But, again, my larger point is this: By limiting SC to the arena of syntax and skills, narrowly defined, we seriously constrict our own thinking. I contend that theorists such as Vygotsky and Bruner provide far more compelling rationales for "given-language" activities, including SC, than do the tree-diagramming devotees of transformational grammar. In Mind and Society (1978), for example, Vygotsky hypothesized a "zone of proximal development" in language learning, suggesting that whatever learners can do with structure they can eventually do on their own; in similar fashion, Bruner (1975, 1978) proposed the metaphor of "scaffolding" to explain how mothers routinely assist children in

linguistic and cognitive tasks. In what follows, I hope to lay out assumptions that might put SC in a more interesting pedagogical arena--namely, social language learning.

Inner Game, Outer Game

Underlying my rationale for SC is an assumption I'll call the Inner Game/Outer Game premise. It goes like this: Any linguistic act is simultaneously two games at once--an inner game of intention and strategy, and an outer game of actual performance.

According to this formulation, all language events are intentional, purposeful, and social--our way of both constructing the world (for ourselves) and communicating it (to others). Thus, a middle-age decision to plan a talk before giving it amounts to a survival plan. The structure for that talk--for example, building background in advance of the main argument--is part of an inner game strategy; the realization of that plan--from vague glimmerings to final computer tinkering--is an outer game activity.

Much of the writing process movement has shown us how increased attention to the inner game can result in better outer game performance. In a way, this is hardly surprising: Since writing is thinking, more planning should lead to better writing. Yet it is equally and paradoxically true that the act of writing can stimulate inner planning. For example, while composing this section, it was the physical act of stringing words left-to-right-in-space that led me to reflect on the reciprocal nature of planning and transcribing, the inner and outer games.

This led me to realize, yet again, that a whole range of Zen-like disciplines, from Suzuki music training to the martial arts, teach both interior focus as well as an orchestrated sequence of outer-game moves. I will return to this point shortly.

For now, let me suggest that in learning to speak and write, we "read" situational contexts, both immediate and imagined, and then create language, within the limits of our ability, to address situations. That such language decisions may occur almost instantaneously--"intuitively," we say--certainly does not deny the validity of the Inner Game/Outer Game premise. Since meaningful gesture, image, speech, or text can only emerge from--and be interpreted in--some sort of intelligible context, the basic task for us as writing teachers seems clear--namely, to help students see how their inner game intentions and strategies relate to context and interact with it. More simply, our job is to help writers enter discourse situations imaginatively, become first-time readers of their own text, and understand that, over time, the text itself will reveal its needs.

Now, assuming that any language situation provides its own set of distinct constraints, it follows that certain sorts of decisions will seem reasonable, others bizarre or nonsensical. For example, you expect more sentences on the topic, not notes from my novel-in-progress. You also expect me to maintain roughly the same academic tone--elegantly informal, yet bemused and friendly--and to signal major points of emphasis, not bury them. In short, you have hundreds of conscious and unconscious text expectations. My sense of your expectations controls my content and voice, the length of my sentences, my level of diction, and my sequencing of points. To repeat, then: Inner game intentions and strategy emerge

from context; these constraints dictate one's outer game performance.

What does all of this have to do with SC? Just this: To date, most SC activities have focused on outer game performance, not on the interplay of intentions and strategy with sentence-level decisions. Because the content of conventional SC exercises is given--and because most exercises lack rhetorical context--some instructors and students have experienced a "twilight zone" feeling in working with them. Peter Elbow sums up the problem well: "In sentence combining, the student is not engaged in figuring out what she wants to say or saying what is on her mind" (233). And because the student is "not saying anything to anyone," Elbow contends that "the results of her work are more often `answers' given to the teacher for correction--not `writing' given to readers for reaction" (233). While Elbow sees value in SC exercises that "face students with an array of acceptable answers," he worries that "the better and more fruitful the exercise, the worse the danger" (233-35).

With Elbow's caution in mind, let me suggest that a "better and more fruitful" given-language activity would engage inner game intentions and planning as the basis for outer game decisions. I willingly concede that simulations can never approximate the real thing; and I have long said that simulations should be an adjunct to real writing, not a substitute for it. However, it hardly seems radical to assert that classrooms, because of their collaborative character, can promote thought about writing. A problem solved collectively, as we all know from experience, can help us as we work on our own. Why else, after all, would our colleagues in math or science solve problems on the board? Why else would artists gather in studios for demonstrations? Why else would we

meet at NCTE conferences to share ideas?

As I hinted earlier, it is in large-group classes that many students who are learning yoga, tai chi, or Suzuki approaches to violin sense a connection between their inner focus and their technical moves. As they subsequently practice on their own, they try to recreate a "felt sense" that is basic to their discipline. The teaching context is collaborative, participatory; the learning is personally constructed, individual. Learning occurs as inner game and outer game merge.

Vicarious Language Learning

Frank Smith puts the issue squarely before us in asserting that much language learning is vicarious (195). Language is acquired, Smith says, without conscious intent as we engage in an activity that someone else may actually be doing (195).

The truth of Smith's startling proposition is abundantly evident all around us--as mothers engage with infants, demonstrating meanings in interactive ways; as pre-school children acquire words at the astonishing rate of about 10 per day, according to George Miller and Patricia Gildea in Scientific American (1987); and as teenagers learn to talk, act, dress, and think exactly like those friends with whom they identify and feel most comfortable. "If this is trial and error learning," as Smith puts it, "other people conduct the trial, and because they can already do what they are doing, there are very few errors" (195).

Smith's claim is especially important as we consider literacy learning. Text becomes our teacher, a source of demonstrations. As

members of the Literacy Club, we assimilate conventions of spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing, not to mention ways to organize, make transitions, build suspense, provide examples, and so on. With practice, we learn to make diction choices based on register, the "feel" of the word in context. Senior Club members learn how to clarify in some situations and to obfuscate in others. For the most part, this vast array of complex and subtle literacy lessons occurs through demonstrations within text itself, not through the intervention of teachers or instructional materials.

You see Smith's point, of course: The surest way to skill in writing is through wide and deep reading as a member of the Literacy Club. And you also anticipate mine: Perhaps the surest way is not the only way. Smith puts matters like this: "If we see ourselves as members of the club, and the other club members do not exclude us, then we cannot help becoming like the other members because of the demonstrations and collaboration we receive. But if we are rejected by a club, or if we decide to exclude ourselves, then we not only fail to become like club members, we often become as different from them as we can be" (196).

The consequence of such exclusion, to use Smith's term, is a loss of sensitivity (192). Our ability to attend to learning demonstrations, whether in the classroom or in text, shuts down. And what are the symptoms of such a shutdown? Boredom. Slack-jawed passivity. A reluctance to try. Sustained boredom, according to this view, permanently damages our ability to learn in specific areas--say, statistics, engine repair, the culinary arts--or, for that matter, writing. Please note that sensitivity, as used here, has more to do with openness to experience than

it does with conscious desire and effort. Think of those students who attend class but only seem to go through the motions of revision. "Believe me," they say. "I just can't write."

Some of these students have skated unengaged through school, missing out on basic literacy experiences, because TV or video games riveted their waking attention. I contend that for such students in particular, various "given-language" activities can sometimes be effective for two reasons. First, the activities are often <u>different</u> from what they are used to, and the novelty of working with others--trying to solve "simple" problems--engages their attention. This is important because learning from text is only possible as one regains a certain degree of <u>sensitivity</u>. Second, the social basis of such activities--where there are multiple right answers and where it's okay to make mistakes--supports learning. Remember Vygotsky: What learners can do collaboratively on one occasion, they will be able to do independently on another. And remember Bruner: The interactive situation provides feedback for self-correction.

Finally, let me note that social learning theory also suggests another possibility for SC instruction--one related to word processing technology. As good SC programs become more widely available as computer software, instructors will have tools to show how various syntactic strategies--adding connectors, deleting redundant information, rearranging words and phrases, changing the form of words--are also basic word-processing operations. If students are to understand computers as tools for revision and editing, it seems essential that we model the syntactic "moves" of revision in shared contexts.

As students practice such behaviors, they are likely to

internalize, simultaneously, certain word-processing routines basic to effective revision and editing. Thus, the "fluency" developed will be partly syntactic, partly rhetorical. What students will take away from the computer will be a facility far more important than embedding adjectives or making participles--namely, a profound sense of the fluidity and potential of any text, their own included.

Summary and Given-Language Illustration

Before I share a sample classroom activity, let me summarize my main points. I asserted, first of all, that writing is simultaneously an inner game/outer game activity and that skill in writing derives from one's ability to address the constraints of rhetorical situations. Inner game intentions, which emerge from context, often dictate one's outer game moves. The value of classrooms, I said, is that they provide a collaborative context for promoting thought about writing.

I then drew upon Frank Smith's assertion that much language learning is vicarious--that to the extent that we are engaged as members of the Literacy Club we are internalizing an enormous array of lessons, without conscious effort or awareness. I argued that certain types of given-language activities--assuming that they stimulate inner game/outer game learning--provide an alternate way to help certain students regain sensitivity to literacy lessons. They support such learning because they engage students collaboratively. And finally I commented on the unrealized potential of SC as computer software.

To close, I present the following format for SC activity, one that

might hold promise in some classrooms. As you consider this material in the context of a persuasive writing unit, please think about it not as a grammar lesson or as a substitute for writing instruction but as an adjunct to it. As I suggested earlier, adding this sort of contextual frame to SC exercises you already use may enhance their instructional effectiveness.

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Situation: Okay, you'll admit it. You like your French fries as much as the next red-blooded American. But you've also begun to realize that eating habits are programmed at an early age--by parents with bad habits, by fast-food commercials on TV, and by gimmicky promotions that offer children toys and other bribes to establish a lifestyle of clogging their arteries. You don't worry about adults making choices to shorten their lifespans--it's a free country, after all--but the health of children seems like another matter. Kids are vulnerable, you believe, and if someone doesn't speak up for their interests, poor health habits are the result. To get at least a few parents thinking, you decide to write a letter to the editor.

Discussion: As you discuss the questions that follow with your writing group, take notes: 1) Who is the particular audience for your letter? 2) What basic appeals can you make to your readers--that is, what values would these readers perhaps have in common? 3) What approaches will likely "turn off" your readers, causing them to stop reading? 4) What will be your basic purpose in this letter? 5) How do you want to come across in accomplishing your purpose--that is, what "voice" do you think will work in this letter?

Assignment: After the situation and writing task are clear to your group, work together to combine sentences from the research notes provided below. Do the combining orally at first, with each person trying to come

up with different options for each cluster. Take notes on the sentences you personally prefer. You may choose to use none of these sentences in your final letter--or you may use some or all of them. Also, you may use this material in any order you choose, to support any point. Finally, you may wish to use certain sentences but change the wording to fit your own purposes. Please note that your letter should have a beginning, middle, and end--and that each group member should do a separate piece of writing.

Footnote: Your research notes discuss "grams of fat." It's helpful to use nickles and pennies to understand this concept. A nickle weighs five grams. If you wrap six nickels together with cellophane tape, you've got a 30 gram package--slightly less than the fat content of a MacDonald's Big Mac or Burger King Whopper. A dozen nickles gives you weight of fat in a cheesburger, shake and fries--about 60 grams. Since a penny weighs 2.5 grams, you can calculate that four pennies weigh 10 grams, eight pennies 20 grams, and so on.

Research notes:

1.1 Many Americans have become health conscious.

1.2 Their consciousness has increased.

1.3 This is thanks to scientific studies.

1.4 The studies were well publicized.

2.1 Our eating habits have changed.

2.2 Levels of blood serum cholesterol have fallen.

2.3 The fall is from 217 to 211 for men.

2.4 The fall is from 223 to 215 for women.

2.5 This is over a 20 year period.

3.1 Such a drop may not seem significant.

3.2 One of its consequences certainly is.

3.3 This consequence is death by heart attack.

4.1 Deaths have been cut by a third.

4.2 The deaths are cardiovascular.

4.3 This is over the past 20 years.

5.1 Still, about 1 million Americans die each year.

5.2 They die from heart attacks.

5.3 They die from strokes.

5.4 They die from other blood-vessel diseases.

6.1 Saturated fats are the main culprit.

6.2 The liver manufactures cholesterol.

6.3 It responds to the stimulus of fats.

6.4 The fats are ingested.

7.1 Fast foods are a big source of such fats.

7.2 These include hamburgers.

7.3 These include French fries.

7.4 These milkshakes.

8.1 A MacDonald's Big Mac has 31 grams of fat.

8.2 The term "Mac Attack" takes on added meaning.

9.1 Equally scary is Burger King's Whopper.

9.2. It drips with juices.

9.3 The juices are succulent.

9.4 It drips with 36 grams of fat.

10.1 Now add to the sandwich a slice of cheese.

10.2 It has 8 grams of fat.

10.3 Now add to the sandwich an order of fries.

10.4 The fries have 11 grams of fat.

10.5 Now add to the sandwich a chocolate shake.

10.6 The shake has 9 grams of fat.

11.1 The total does not make for ideal nutrition.

11.2 The total is approaches 60 grams of fat.

11.3 This is in a single meal.

12.1 One expert recommends 10 to 20 grams of fat.

12.2 The expert is Dr. Glen Griffin.

12.3 This is a <u>daily</u> average.

12.4 The daily average is healthy.

13.1 Kids today are fatter than kids 20 year ago.

13.2 Many of us remain hooked on a diet.

13.3 The diet is fat-rich.

13.4 The diet emphasizes fast foods.

14.1 Health authorities say something.

14.2 Americans may be health conscious.

14.3 We still get 42% of our calories from fat.

14.4 This is four times the body's requirements.

15.1 Especially vulnerable are American kids.

15.2 The kids are typical.

15.3 They see ten thousand commercials a year.

15.4 The commercials are on TV.

15.5 The commercials are for food.

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